

GLOUCESTER RUGBY

SATURDAY, APRIL 22, 2017

**STADE MARCEL DE FLANDRE – EUROPEAN RUGBY
CHALLENGE CUP**

**IT'S BURNS NIGHT IN LA ROCHELLE AS GLOUCESTER CLINCH
EUROPEAN FINAL SPOT**

LA ROCHELLE 14 GLOUCESTER RUGBY 16

Billy Burns will get the headlines for his 16 point haul, but it was a team of heroes who went to La Rochelle and fought like demons to secure a magnificent 16-14 European Rugby Challenge Cup win on Saturday evening.

To win in the seemingly impenetrable Stade Marcel Deflandre would need a serious effort, and when the chips were down, the visitors muscled up in defence, and through Burns' opportunist score celebrated a famous victory.

With Burns' boot adding to his five-pointer, David Humphreys' men have put to bed the ghost of not being able to grind out late victories, and toasted the beer as the first team to come away from the Stade Marcel Deflandre with a win in this campaign.

As is always the case in these close encounters, an element of luck was required. La Rochelle fly-half Brock James was off target with four kicks at goal in the second-half as Gloucester came under the cosh. None were easy, any one of them would have won the game.

But Gloucester's character and, in particular, their defensive effort meant that their win was fully merited, especially given La Rochelle's home record and form this season – the Stade Marcel Deflandre is a real fortress and the Cherry and Whites had been well beaten here on their last visit, back in December.

This time around though, they had the edge and thoroughly earned their passage through into the final in Edinburgh. The win in France may have been memorable, but it will mean little if the final is lost.

A cauldron of sound and colour greeted the teams as they entered the arena ahead of kick off. Predictably it was predominantly yellow and black, as the La Rochelle supporters looked to make home advantage count.

It was a lively opening from Gloucester as they moved the ball wide at the earliest opportunity before Burns and Heinz both kicked downfield, probing for territory. The game plan looked evident, move the home team around where possible.

The Stade Marcel DeFlandre was bubbling, and it wasn't long before things boiled over. Jone Qovu dropped an elbow on Willi Heinz who was lying defenceless in a ruck. The result was a yellow card and a 9th minute penalty from Billy Burns for a 0-3 lead.

The next few minutes saw Gloucester try and press home their advantage, Jonny May coming in off his wing looking for work on several occasions, but despite some promising moments, no further score came.

However, superb work at the breakdown by Henry Trinder halted one home charge, which then led to Gloucester winning a penalty at the next ruck and Billy Burns made no mistake for 0-6.

The home team responded by showing just how dangerous they can be, Levani Botia breaking a tackle as he fielded a kick downfield, inspiring an ominous attack which was only halted by a knock on.

Gloucester then had a real chance to extend the lead as Trinder's cunning kick downfield bounced awkwardly and forced the home to concede a 5 metre lineout, but they couldn't capitalise against the huge La Rochelle pack.

The home team made the most of the escape, kicking downfield and winning a penalty for holding on as Gloucester tried to run it back. Fly-half Brock James duly made it 3-6.

The home crowd were growing restless as their team continued to make basic errors, and Gloucester nearly pounced after some great build-up play, Thrush giving Trinder some running room but the centre was tackled into touch a few metres out.

It had been a phenomenal effort to this point by Gloucester who would surely have had a couple of scores against most teams. However, they were dealt a blow on 35 minutes when Tom Savage was sinbinned for clearing out at a ruck with his shoulder. It was a tough call.

Controversy then reigned as time looked to be up as Willi Heinz cleared from near his own line. Incredibly, referee Brace played on, La Rochelle forced a scrum penalty and James promptly levelled the scores at half time.

Gloucester could in all honesty, feel slightly hard done by. They'd played much of the rugby but didn't have the points to show for their efforts. The final penalty looked to be a real kick in the teeth.

However, the Cherry and Whites had shown that they could go toe to toe with the Top 14's top side this season. The challenge now was to repeat the dose in the second 40 minutes.

Predictably, with Savage still in the sinbin, La Rochelle came out guns blazing, trying to use their big pack and the driving maul to pummel Gloucester into submission. However, the remaining seven Gloucester forwards dug deep until their comrade returned to the fray.

All the action was taking place in the Gloucester half though, and it was taking a magnificent defensive effort, particularly up front, to keep La Rochelle at bay.

Gloucester were living off scraps and playing from deep, but finally forced a penalty after more great work at the breakdown by Henry Trinder. Burns ignored a cacophony of boos to nervelessly nudge his team into a 6-9 lead.

Back came the home team and Gloucester had to defend their line with their lives. However, when La Rochelle went wide, Billy Burns picked off Brock James' pass and ran it back all the way for a vital try. The fly-half then added the extras. 6-16 going into the final quarter.

There was still plenty of time left though, and La Rochelle were quickly back within a score. Gloucester were penalised for accidental offside having received the kick-off, then pinged at the scrum and James narrowed the gap to 9-16. But James then missed another long-range effort with 15 minutes left to play.

But, from the drop-out, a missed tackle saw Murimurivalu and the excellent Botia steam into the 22. The line was defended bravely, but eventually Damien Lagrange muscled his way over from close range. James crucially pulled the conversion wide.

The home side, full of confidence, and with their raucous crowd roaring them on, muscled up and handed James a pair of opportunities from the boot. An optimistic drop goal drifted wide, and then a penalty ended in the same result.

Gloucester desperately needed to ease the pressure and did so via a crucial breakdown penalty for the visitors, won by Ben Morgan. It yielded a vital breather for the defence, but Gloucester still had to negotiate the final two minutes.

They managed the first 100 seconds without drama, but a late turnover saw the hosts surge forward. Gloucester had been here before (remember Bordeaux?), but the ball was lost in contact, and Andrew Brace's whistle was met with hundreds of West Country cheers, both sides of the English Channel, to cap a memorable night.